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ABSTRACT

This study offered a means of evaluating the long-term effects of the Beginning with Books gift packet program on literacy experiences provided by the family, on the children's literacy and language abilities, and on the skills of the children involved in the program as perceived by their kindergarten teachers. The program is a nonprofit prevention-oriented literacy agency affiliated with the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. Subjects included 27 families who had received the gift packet through two different county health department well-baby clinics and 14 families in the comparison group. Three types of measures (language and literacy, family literacy experience, and classroom literacy) were utilized to elicit information about family literacy experiences as well as the literacy skills of the children. Parents and children participated in interviews and the parent responded to a parent questionnaire before participating in a parent-child book sharing experience. Results indicated that participants in the program provided more literacy experiences in the home for their children. The parents who received the gift packet also visited the library more often and provided more reading materials in their homes. The children whose parents received the gift packet were perceived by their teachers as having higher reading ability than children of parents who did not receive the packet. The performance of children from both groups on the literacy tasks was similar. (Two figures and two tables of data are included and seven references are attached.) (MG)

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THE BEGINNING WITH BOOKS GIFT BOOK PROGRAM: EFFECTS ON FAMILY AND CHILD LITERACY

FINAL REPORT

BY

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Finally, we thank the Buhl Foundation and Vira I. Heinz Endowment for their funding support.

Abstract

This study offered a means of evaluating the long term effects of the Beginning with Books gift packet program on literacy experiences provided by the family, on the children's literacy and language abilities, and on the skills of the children involved in the program as perceived by their kindergarten teachers.

Results of this project indicate that participants in the Beginning with Books Program provided more literacy experiences in the home for their children. Many parents who participated in the program remembered receiving the packet and the suggestions for sharing reading experiences with their children. The parents who received the gift packet also visited the library more often and provided more reading materials in their homes. Moreover, the children whose parents received the gift packet were perceived by their teachers as having higher reading ability than children of parents who did not receive the packet. The performance of children from both groups on the literacy tasks was similar.

Beginning with Books Gift Book Program: Effects on Family and Child Literacy

Introduction

The importance of literacy experiences for young children has been documented by many researchers including Durkin, 1966; Heath, 1983; Heath & Thomas, 1981; and Teale, 1986. We know that learning to read and write begins very early in life and that reading and writing develop concurrently and interrelatedly. One of the keys to literacy development appears to be the opportunities that children have in their homes for exposure to printed matter, to see other people reading, and to experience being read to from infancy.

The Beginning with Books Program, a nonprofit prevention-oriented literacy agency affiliated with The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, provides materials and activities to encourage family involvement with literacy. The agency currently operates three programs in cooperation with more than three dozen other agencies serving low-income or low-literate families. Its Gift Book Program distributes packets of children's books with suggestions for use to families at well-baby clinics, homeless shelters, teen parenting programs, and other such sites. The book packets contain three high quality story books, suggestions on reading to children, and a coupon to be taken to the library for a fourth free book. Parents who accept gift book packets are counselled about the importance of regularly reading aloud to their preschool children in the early years.

A preliminary evaluation of the Gift Book Program was conducted prior to the current project. Parents were asked to respond to an initial questionnaire before they received the gift packet and a follow-up questionnaire six months later about family reading, books in the home, and library use. The responses suggested that the program affected the time children and parents spent looking at books together. Parents' comments were uniformly enthusiastic and often revealed growing pride in their children's literacy development. The results generated further

interest in investigating the long-term effects of the Beginning with Books program upon these same families several years later.

The purpose of this project, therefore, was to evaluate the long-term effects (three to four years later) of the Beginning with Books program on the literacy activities of participating parents and children. The specific questions addressed were: (1) What is the parental response to the packet at the present time? (2) How do the literacy experiences of families who received gift books compare to their experiences prior to receiving the packet and to the experiences of families who did not receive the packets? (3) How do children whose parents received the packet perform on a set of language and literacy tasks as compared to a group of children whose parents did not receive the packet? (4) How do teachers perceive the language and literacy skills of children whose parents received the gift packet as compared to their perceptions of children whose parents did not receive the packet?

Methodology

Target Population/Sample

In 1984-85, Beginning with Books distributed packets of children's books to approximately 1,000 families whose young children between the ages of 1 and 3 years old were patients at six different county health department well-baby clinics. These particular clinics were targeted because: (1) they were located in communities where the socioeconomic status of residents was low, (2) they could provide ample space for the Beginning with Books program to operate, and (3) the clinical staff was willing to accommodate the program. The program operated as described previously, except that a fourth book was included in the packet, along with a flyer describing the programs and operating hours of the nearest public library (rather than the coupon for another free book).

The group of families who participated in this study (referred to as the project group) were recruited from families who were involved in the earlier study and had indicated that they would not object to being contacted again about their participation in the program. These parents had received book packets and counseling at either the Braddock clinic or the Northside clinic in 1984-

85. Sixty-three such families were identified and their names and telephone numbers were provided to researchers. Of the 63 families who were offered $10 for their participation. 27 agreed to participate in the study, 11 from the Braddock clinic and 16 from the Northside clinic.

In addition to the project group, a comparison group of families was recruited from the Northside and Rankin clinics. Families recruited from the Northside clinic had attended the clinic on days when the packets were not being distributed. Packets had not been distributed to families at the Rankin clinic due to a lack of available space for the program to operate. However, the Rankin site was judged comparable to the Northside and Braddock sites in terms of the low socioeconomic status of the families served. For purposes of confidentiality, telephone contact for this study was initiated by health department personnel who also informed prospective participants of the remuneration parents could expect to receive for their participation. From the combined list of 22, 14 families agreed to participate. There were five families from the Northside clinic and nine families from the Rankin clinic.

The final sample for this study consisted of 41 children, 27 in the project group and 14 in the comparison group. The frequency distribution of race and gender for both groups is listed in Table 1.

Instrumentation

Three types of measures were utilized to elicit information about family literacy experiences as well as the literacy skills of the children. Each is described below.

Language and Literacy Measures. As a measure of the language literacy skills of the children, a series of literacy tasks were administered to each child. The child's tasks included: (1) following oral directions; (2) writing his/her name and other words; (3) building words with blocks; (4) Concepts About Print Test (CAP); (5) letter recognition; and (6) story writing. These instruments were field tested by administering each of them to three different groups of children: a group of children in a public kindergarten, a group attending a private day care and kindergarten, and a group attending a different daycare center. Revisions of the literacy tasks

included clarification of directions for the questions and restrictions in the allotted time for specific tasks. The child tasks took approximately 25-30 minutes to administer.

Family Literacy Experience Measures. A parent questionnaire was designed to obtain information about both the home/family environment as it related to literacy and the nature and extent of early reading experiences in the home. The parent questionnaire was field tested on a group of low-income mothers from an adult literacy program and a library program. Following the field testing experience this questionnaire was modified for clarification. The parent questionnaire contained the following components: child's interests and background; family activities; library usage; specific literacy activities; parent-child book sharing experience; and, for those in the project group, questions about the gift-book packet. Items from the questionnaire were read aloud to each parent by an interviewer who then recorded each response.

An additional measure of family literacy experiences was the parent-child book sharing experience. This measure included a checklist to be completed by the interviewer who observed the book sharing experience (which is described later). The checklist included: parent behaviors during the story session: child behaviors and interest level; and parent/child interaction.

Classroom Literacy Measure. A questionnaire was developed and sent to kindergarten teachers of the children to obtain information about teacher perceptions of the child relative to literacy performance. Teachers were asked to evaluate each child's literacy activities in the classroom including: reading and writing experiences; language usage; reading ability; and library usage. The teachers were asked to rate the child according to his/her participation in literacy activities and compare that child to the other children in the classroom. The rating scale was based on whether the child performed the activity often, sometimes, seldom, or never. The teacher was also encouraged to include any additional comments or observations about each child's literacy behaviors which were not specifically addressed by the questionnaire.

Procedures

The 41 families in the sample were scheduled for interviews in their local area. The Immanuel Lutheran Church in Braddock and the YMCA on the Northside were designated as the

sites for the interviews. The appointments were arranged so that the parent and child could be interviewed during the same session.

First, the interviewer talked to the parent and child informally to establish a relaxed atmosphere. The parent was then asked to complete forms which included: consent to participate in the study for both parent and child; permission for release of child's school records; permission for teacher to complete a questionnaire; certificate of compliance; and family background information. While the parent completed forms, the interviewer introduced the child to "Sam" the puppet to help create a game-like format. The interviewer then administered the child literacy tasks. Upon completion of the tasks, the child received a book for participating in the study and was given materials to draw, color, or write while the parent responded to the parent questionnaire. Once the questionnaire was completed a parent-child book sharing experience was initiated. Each parent was given the story *The Chick and the Duckling* to share with his/her child while the interviewer completed the checklist. The session ended with payment to the parent of a $10 fee for transportation and participation.

The final component of the project, the teacher questionnaire, was mailed to each child's teacher during the months of April and May. This involved mailings to 28 different teachers at 22 different schools. Teachers were requested to complete and return the questionnaire by the end of April.

Analysis & Results

Question 1: What is the parental response to the packet at the present time?

Twenty-five of the 27 parents (92.6%) in the project group remembered receiving the packet some three to four years ago. These 25 parents also indicated that they looked at the books with their children and enjoyed the experience. Nineteen of the parents remembered receiving instructions with the packet, and 13 of these 19 (68%) felt the instructions and suggestions given to them about sharing books with their children were helpful.

Two-thirds of the parents (67%) in the project group could specifically identify their child's favorite book from the packet. The overall favorite book was *500 Words to Grow On* with *Goodnight Moon* chosen as the second favorite. The books from the gift packet distributed 4 years ago still remain in 70% , or 19 of the 27 homes.

Question 2: How do the literacy experiences of families who received gift books compare to their experiences prior to receiving the packet and to the experiences of families who did not receive the packets?

Prior to receiving their packet of books three to four years ago, parents in the project group responded to a pre-questionnaire about their literacy experiences in the home at that time. These responses were compared to their most recent responses on the parent questionnaire (post-questionnaire) from the current study. Differences are evident in the parents' responses before and three to four years after receiving the packets on several questions (See Figure 1).

For example, when asked how often the parent read to the child, 37% of the project group responded "daily" on the pre-questionnaire but on the post-questionnaire the response "daily" was reported by 55% of the project group parents. Additionally, 30% of these parents reported on the pre-questionnaire that they visited the library. However, in their most current responses, 74% of the project group parents reported that they visited the library. Finally, parents were asked how often their child looks at books on his/her own on both questionnaires. Prior to receiving the packets 33% of these parents reported "daily" compared to 41% after receiving the packet.

In comparing the responses of the project group with those of the comparison group (See Figure 1), 21% of parents in the comparison group reported that they read "daily" to their child compared to the 55% in the project group. However, this figure for the comparison group (21%) is also lower than the project group's original responses of 37%. In terms of library visits, 36% of the comparison group reported that they visited the library, a figure comparable to that reported on the pre-questionnaire for the project group and much lower than the 74% reported on the post-questionnaire by the project group.

One point of comparison between the two groups involves the frequency with which the children look at books on their own. Seventy-one percent of the comparison group reported that their children look at books on their own "daily". This figure is much higher than either of those reported for the project group's pre-and post responses (33% and 41% respectively). Additionally, parents in the comparison group reported that 71% of their children spend more than 15 minutes at a time when they look at books on their own. Forty-eight percent of the project group parents reported that their children spend this much time looking at books on their own. Since the project group reports reading to their children more often than the comparison group, one explanation for this difference may be that children who are read to daily are less likely to look at books on their own for extended periods of time. However, a breakdown of the responses reveals that in the comparison group, the majority of the children who look at books daily are read to "once every few days", whereas in the project group, the majority of the children who look at books on their own daily are also read to once a day.

Another observation involves the responses of the groups with regard to the frequency with which children asked to be read to: 81.4% of the project group parents and 64.2% of the comparison group parents responded, "daily." Both of these figures exceed those reported for the frequency with which the parent actually reads to the child (55% and 21%, respectively). However, over 90% of the parents in both groups also reported that someone else is available to read to the child as well.

Differences were noted between the groups with regard to the parents' reports of their children's writing behaviors in the home. For example, 77.8% of parents in the project group reported that their children make up words to write on paper, while 42.9% of parents in the comparison group reported their children doing this (See Figure 1).

The questions concerning television viewing habits revealed little difference between the two groups. Both groups watch television about the same number of hours with the majority responding that they watched television at least two hours per day. Of the four television programs specifically identified in the questionnaire (Sesame Street, Mr. Rogers, Tell Me A Story, and

Reading Rainbow), 55.6% of the children in the project group chose Sesame Street as their favorite and 40% chose Mr. Rogers. In the comparison group, 42.9% chose Mr. Rogers, and 35.7% chose Sesame Street.

The performance of the parents in the book-sharing evaluation experience revealed one difference between the two groups. Although, both groups shared the story in basically the same manner, with parent and child sitting close together and the parent holding the book so both could share the story, 89% of parents in the project group were observed reading with expression, while 62% of parents in the comparison group were observed doing this. Most children in both groups were quite attentive while the story was being read.

Question 3: How do children whose parents received the packet perform on a set of language and literacy tasks as compared to a group of children whose parents did not receive the packet?

The mean scores and standard deviations of the children's literacy tasks are listed in Table 2 for both project and comparison groups. The results are summarized as follows:

The ability of the children to follow oral directions revealed few differences between the two groups. Most of the children were able to **follow oral directions** well. Ninety-two percent of the children from both groups were able to follow five or all of the set of six oral directions correctly.

The activity that required the children to **build words with letter blocks** was difficult for both groups of children. This was evident in both groups by the number of children who did not have one correct response: 65% were unable to create any correct words with the blocks while only 19.5% were able to create one word.

The Concepts About Print Test (1979), which measured the child's awareness of print, also revealed few differences between the two groups. The scores ranged from three to nineteen correct responses. The mean for the project group was 11.23, (S.D. 4.94) and 11.43, (S.D. 3.11) for the comparison group. Both groups were able to recognize left to right progression and understood that print, rather than pictures, carries the message. However, most children had

problems with questions concerning punctuation and the ability to recognize rearranged letters in words. Raw scores for the CAP test were transformed into stanine scores. The overall Stanine score for both groups (normed on New Zealand children ages 5-7) is four. In other words, compared to the norm group, the children in this study scored at or about the 40th percentile.

The **letter recognition** task required the child to name both upper and lowercase letters. Children in both groups scored approximately the same on this task and little difference was noted. The total score that could be obtained on this task was 54: The mean for the project group was 45.04, (S.D. 10.58), while the comparison group had a mean of 41.71 (S.D. 15.70).

The **writing a story task** required the child to create and write a story. The scoring was based on the number of recognizable letters and words the child had written. There was little difference in performance between groups; the project group's mean score was 8.08 (S.D.1.06); while the comparison group's mean score was 7.71 (S.D. 1.49). Most of the children in both groups were writing stories using distinguishable and recognizable letters, but not necessarily putting them in word form.

The children were also asked to **write their name and other words** that were familiar to them. The number of words the child attempted to write and spell correctly were tallied. The mean score for the project group, for number of words attempted, was 5.19 (S.D. 1.52) and for the comparison group, 5.21 (S.D. 2.33). Additionally, the mean score of the number of words the child attempted and spelled correctly was 3.35 (S.D. 2.30) for the project group while the comparison group had a mean score of 3.36 (S.D. 3.20).

Question 4: How do teachers perceive the language and literacy skills of children whose parents received the gift packet as compared to their perceptions of children whose parents did not receive the packet?

A total of 37 questionnaires from 28 different kindergarten teachers at 22 different schools were returned. Of these 37, 24 represent children in the project group and 13, children in the comparison group. Of the 24 children in the project group, 83% had attended preschool for a year

or more; whereas, of the 13 children in the comparison group, 50% had attended a preschool for a year or more.

Teachers of children in the project group reported that 65% of these children "often" actively participated in the stories while in the comparison group 33% were reported as participating "often". Teachers for both groups reported the same percentages of children asking questions during the story: 39% for the project group and 38% for the comparison group. Also, 50% of the children in the comparison group were reported as asking to be read to and requesting particular books while 26% of the children in the project group were reported as making this request.

Finally, teachers rated the relative reading ability of the children as compared to the other children in the class. Sixty-one percent of the project group were ranked in the top third of their class in reading ability while 46% of the comparison group were ranked in the top third. Similarly, when rating the relative language ability of the children, teachers placed 65% of the project group in the top third and 42% of the comparison group in the top third. As mentioned above a greater percentage of children in the project group had attended preschool for a year or more; therefore, these differences may partly reflect differences in preschool experience.

Limitations

Although data about family literacy activities were obtained from the project group prior to their participation in the program, and an attempt was made to recruit a similar comparison group that had not been involved in Beginning with Books, the sampling procedures available to us have some inherent limitations. First, our participants were volunteers, thus we have no way of knowing how similar they are to those who chose not to participate in the study. Second, the small sample size available for comparison inhibited attempts to match the groups and control for such variables as gender, race, and preschool experience of children. However, there was no indication that the groups were different on relevant variables in ways that would explain the obtained results.

Follow-up studies are difficult ones, given the many factors that can influence behaviors and performance over time. One is relying on the self-reports of participants (parents) relative to what they do in the home that can be identified as literacy based. However, in this study, in addition to

asking parents to describe what they remember about the gift book packet and to discuss what they provided in the home in the way of literacy experiences, we administered a number of literacy and language tasks to assess the performance of the children. Furthermore, we asked teachers for their perceptions about the children whose parents had received the packets; thus, we did provide for multiple measures that helped us to substantiate our findings.

Summary

This study attempted to evaluate the long term effects of the Beginning with Books gift packet program (an early childhood program to promote family literacy) on literacy experiences provided by the family, children's literacy and language abilities, and school performance as perceived by teachers. Conclusions that can be drawn from the data include the following:

1. A large number of parents remembered receiving the packet and read the books regularly to their children. The fact that the parents could identify specific books from the packet is certainly a positive indication of their response to the gift packet received three or four years ago.

2. Project participants' questionnaire responses suggest that parents who received book packets are reading to their children more often, visiting the library with increased frequency, and reporting that their children are looking at books on their own more often than they had initially. Relative to the comparison group these same differences are maintained with the exception of the frequency and the amount of time parents report children spend looking at books on their own.

3. The two groups of children did not differ in their performance on the literacy tasks. Children from both groups were able to follow oral directions well as directed by the interviewer. They were also able to write simple words that related to their lives such as, their name, and the words: mom, dad, love, cat, dog, and stop. The children in this study were able to distinguish letters from words, left to right progression, lowercase and uppercase letters, and to recognize that print, rather than pictures carries the message. However, these children in general had difficulty doing word by word matching, knowing the function of punctuation marks, and noticing changes in word order in sentences. Both groups of children wrote stories using recognizable letters. Some of the children were able to write a story using letters and correct spellings of words, but the majority used only

recognizable letters to relay the message. Finally, the children of this study were able to communicate well and spoke freely to the interviewer.

4. Children from both groups actively participated in listening to stories in school and appeared to be interested in them. A greater percentage of children who received the gift book packets were rated in the top third of their class in reading and language ability at the kindergarten level.

In conclusion, there were differences in the literacy experiences provided in the home between those who had been involved in the Beginning With Books program and those who had not. Moreover, the children whose parents were the recipients of these packets appear to respond more positively to various literacy experiences in the classroom; in fact a greater percentage of these children tend to be perceived by the teacher as having higher reading ability than children whose parents did not receive the packet. There did not, however, appear to be any differences in the performance of these children on various tasks assessing their language and literacy abilities.

Recommendations

The recommendations listed below include those that may be helpful for program development as well as several focused on specific ideas for additional research.

1. The results of the study suggest that frequent follow-ups to parents about the importance of sharing stories with their children as well as accompanying materials such as attractive story suggestions or invitations to library programs would increase the likelihood of continued use.
2. Given the importance of early writing experiences, writing materials could be included with the packets as well as during the presentation of the packet. Such inexpensive items as crayons and writing paper could be provided.
3. An attractive visual presentation of the important behaviors associated with creating an interest in reading could be provided. A checklist could include: the importance of modeling reading and writing behaviors; encouraging children to look at books on their own; and the advantage of providing writing materials. (Colorful visual prompts such as

posters could be displayed as the interview with parents is taking place and then a checklist that duplicates the ideas on the posters could be given to the parents). It might be helpful to work with local television stations so that this checklist might be shown several times a week along with an 800 number that parents can call for additional information.

4. Given that Gift Book parents reported using the library more often than the comparison group, increased efforts to acquaint the parents and children with the library and the programs offered might be useful.

5. Information obtained directly from the library, on the library usage of parents and children who are participants in the Beginning with Books program could be documented from the time they first receive the packet to determine the frequency as well as the nature of their visit. Questions regarding the type, number of books, and purpose of visit could be addressed.

6. Prior to receiving gift packets, parents can be asked to respond to a more detailed questionnaire, including demographic information, which would allow for a more detailed follow-up in subsequent years.

7. There is a need for additional research on the nature of the book sharing experience that parents provide for their children. The placement and nature of questioning by the parent to the child during the story, as well as the involvement of the child are areas that need additional study.

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TABLE 1

RACE AND GENDER OF

PROJECT AND COMPARISON GROUPS

	Comparison Group		Project Group		
	African-American	White	African-American	White	
Boys	1 (7%)	4 (29%)	9 (33%)	7 (26%)	= 21 Boys
Girls	3 (21%)	6 (43%)	1(4%)	10 (37%)	= 20 Girls
Total	4 (28%)	10 (72%)	10 (37%)	17 (63%)	= 41 Children

TABLE 2

MEAN SCORES OF CHILDREN'S LITERACY TASKS

Task	Project Group (N=26) Mean Score	Project Group (N=26) Standard Dev.	Comparison Group (N=14) Mean Score	Comparison Group (N=14) Standard Dev.
Follows Oral Directions	5.62	.50	5.21	1.63
Build Words With Blocks	.69	1.51	.57	1.51
CAP Test	11.23	4.94	11.43	3.11
Letter Recognition	45.04	10.58	41.71	15.70
Writing a Story	8.08	1.06	7.71	1.49
Words Attempted	5.19	1.52	5.21	2.33
Words Correct	3.35	2.30	3.36	3.20

Literacy Experiences in the Home

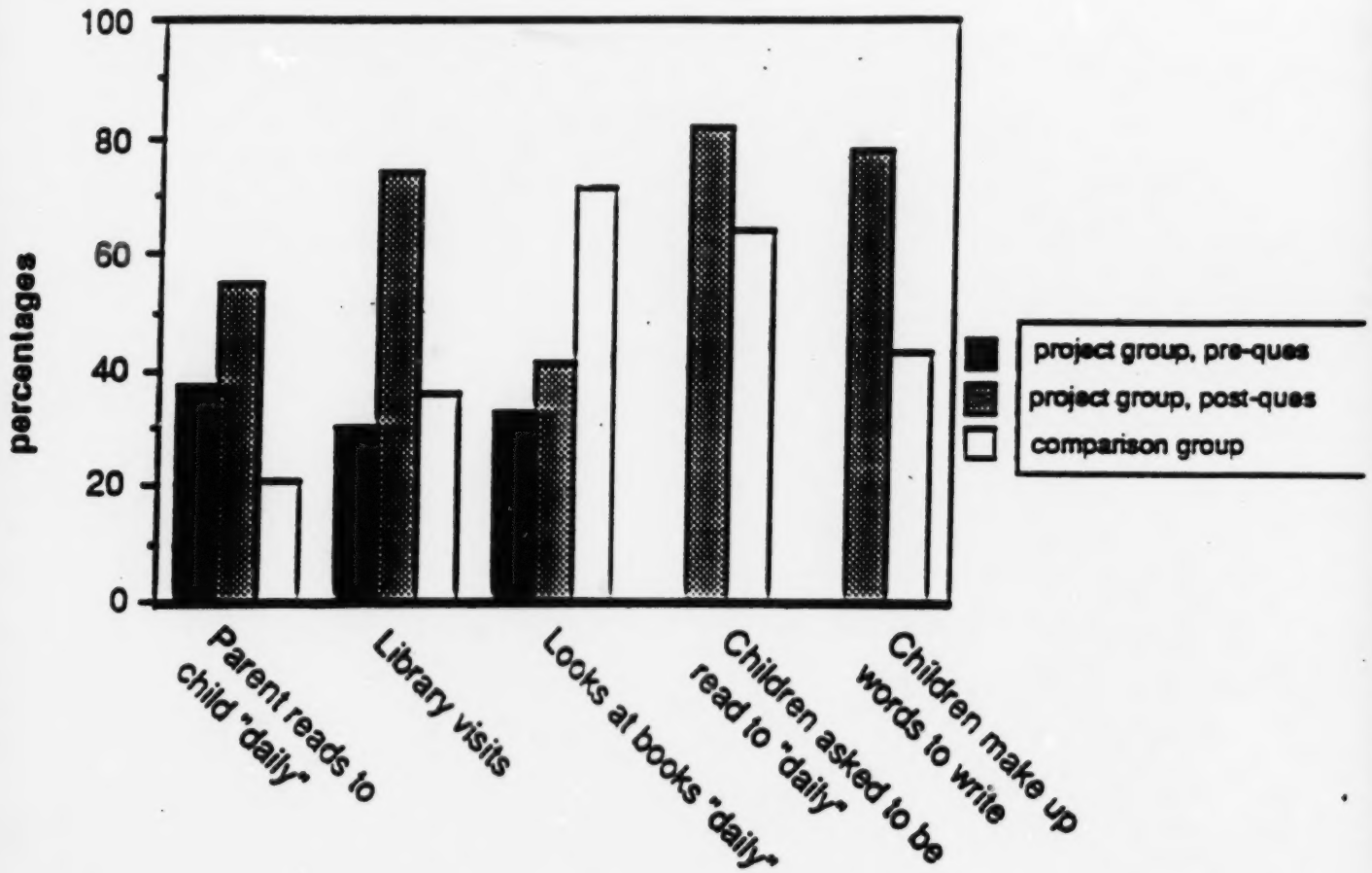

Figure 1

Teachers' Perceptions

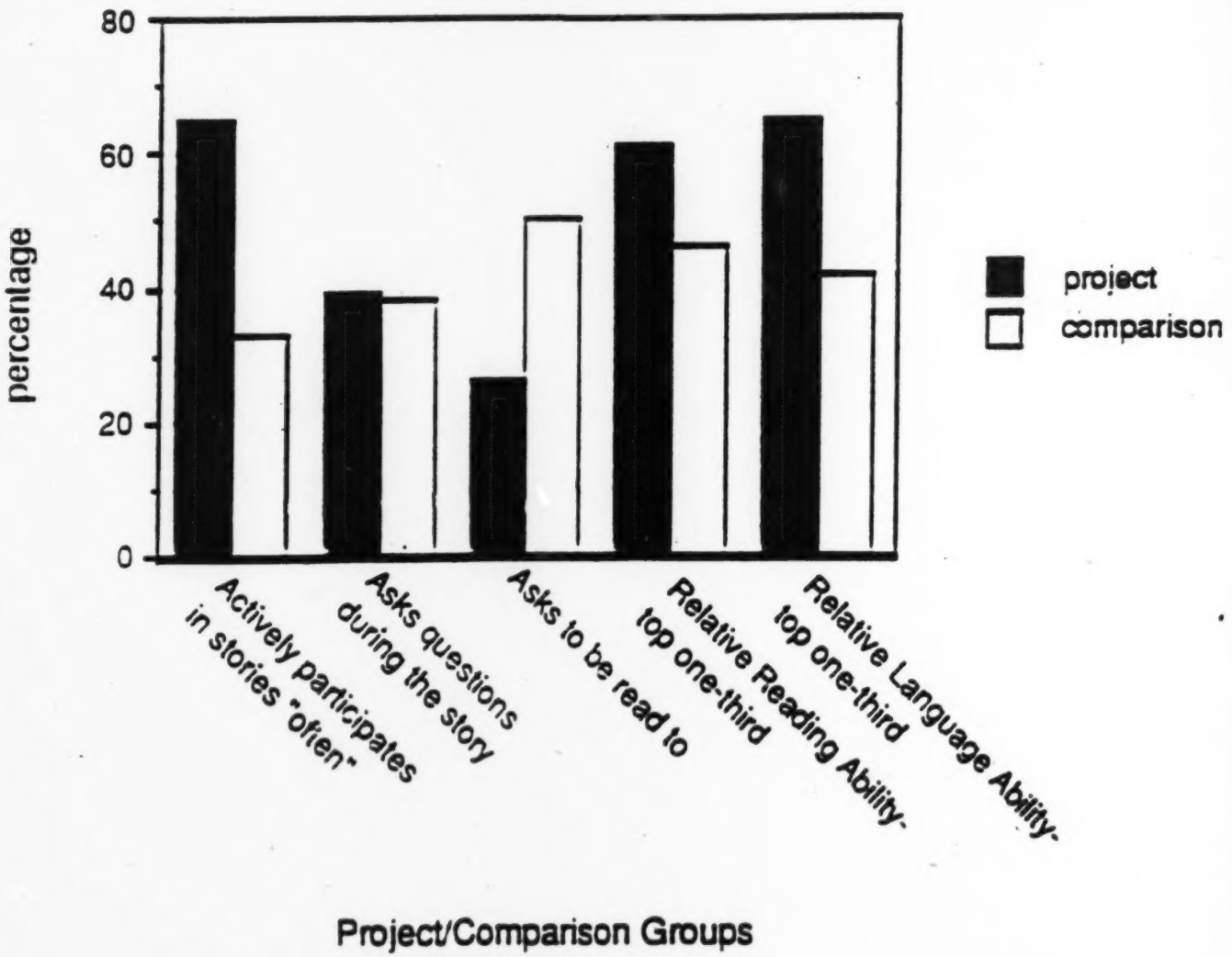

Figure 2